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ABSTRACT

This digest provides a process for assuring that the unique needs of students who are gifted are addressed within the context of systemic educational reform. Several key elements guide the process: creating belief statements, clarifying the issues, and designing strategies for implementation. Generating belief statements based on what is believed about all learners helps the district or school to create a set of expected outcomes that will affect the entire community. The next step calls for identifying important critical issues to help narrow the topics of concern and focus discussion. Designing implementation strategies involves the following five steps: analyze the language; list key decision makers, stakeholders, and risk takers; infuse gifted/talented into school policies; visualize the desired direction; and enact equitable access to resources. The digest lists reform strategies generated at a gifted leadership conference, focusing on grouping options and outcomes-based education. An inevitable outcome of blending gifted education and school reform is believed to be better schools for all students. (JDD)

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Blending Gifted Education and School Reform

Gail E. Hanninen

School reform initiatives have resulted in many changes in American education during the past decade. The complexity of the process has presented numerous challenges for every educator. Juxtaposed against the reform climate are several other changes that have affected American classrooms: changing demographics, increasing diversity of student populations, and limited fiscal resources. It is within this broad context that the needs of our most capable youth must be challenged. This digest provides a process for assuring that the unique needs of students who are gifted are addressed within the context of systemic reform. Several key elements guide the process: creating belief statements, clarifying the issues, and designing strategies for implementation.

Creating Belief Statements

Belief statements define systemic parameters as reflected in a district's vision statement and expected outcomes. For example, what is believed about students who are gifted is based on what is believed about all learners. Creating belief statements about all learners is guided by the following questions:

1. What do we believe (about all learners)?
2. What do we know?
3. What do we want?
4. What do we do?

Processing these questions generates a set of district or school level belief statements, vision statements, and expected outcomes that will affect the entire community. Discussion should include educators and parents of students who are gifted and talented as well as other representatives from various special interests groups. By working individually, in small groups or as a whole, each person generates belief statements. The general discussion provides an opportunity to examine beliefs individuals hold about students who are gifted and talented. Through a process of narrowing down the statements, each small group lists five most strongly held statements. Later, when groups combine their statements, a list of 10 to 15 strongly held belief statements provides an organizational profile. A second list of belief statements may also be generated around the question, "What do you believe about programs for students who are gifted/talented?"

Clarifying the Issues

To understand elements of systemic change, each educator needs to clarify the issues. Again, a key question guides the process: "As you reflect upon what you know about education reform, the best practices in education, and your experience with students who are gifted/talented, what are the critical issues that come to your mind?" Identifying the five most important critical issues helps narrow the topics of concern and focus discussion.

Designing Strategies

Developing a successful relationship between education reform efforts and gifted education is linked to five key strategies:

1. Analyze the language.
2. List key decision makers, stakeholders, and risk takers.
3. Infuse gifted/talented into several school policies.
4. Visualize the desired direction.
5. Enact equitable access to resources.

The acronym "ALIVE" means that each strategy incorporates valuable information gleaned in one of the other strategies and does not function in isolation.

Analyze the language refers to interpreting what is *really* being said. For example, the concept of *inclusionary programs* sounds very altruistic, but might mean "inclusion of special education students only" in the regular school setting. In this example, students such as those being served by Chapter 1 programs, gifted programs, or English as a Second Language (ESL) programs may continue to be excluded from inclusive schools because the terminology has multiple meanings.

Language in vision statements, district policies, and expected outcomes can also be used to benefit students who are gifted. The following statement of purpose uses several helpful words and phrases: "The purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable learners to *develop their individual potential* and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to *contribute to* a healthy society and a *prosperous and sustainable economy*" (Ministry of Education, 1991). Words like "individual," "each," and "potential" are inviting. Collective words such as "all," "they" and "everyone" can be misleading. Finding terms that are links to systemic parameters is crucial to embedding special services in policy, linking a school system with the community, and developing a shared vision.

List key decision makers, stakeholders, and risk takers means identifying individuals and groups who are strategic influencers. The people most affected by school system changes need to be included in discussions from the beginning. The number of persons needs to be manageable. The group should represent a broad range of constituencies, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, and members of the community. When choosing community members, keep in mind that key individuals who have credibility with and the respect of their colleagues will influence support for change.

Infuse gifted/talented into several school policies implies that well-written local district policies provide a basis for developing quality program services for all students, including those who are gifted. Although services for students who are gifted need to be defined in a specific program policy, they should also be interspersed throughout broader policy statements on curriculum, instruction, counseling, special populations, parent involvement, and staff development.

The following excerpt from a local district policy statement reflects that community's beliefs and priority for programming: "Challenge their multiple intelligences and engage students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds." This example depicts a connectedness to the whole district and supports the district's need to address "multiple intelligences" and "diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds" of all students. Thus, infusing services that meet the needs of students who are gifted/talented into local policy statements can work two ways.

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Visualize the desired direction means that within the context of the total school system, design a clearly stated and concise framework for delivering services to students who are gifted. Such a design should challenge the future and illustrate not only a relationship of such services to the total system, but also provide accountability for a continuum of services from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Enact equitable access to resources means using the first four strategies to build equitable access to resources in a defensible manner. The notion that the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" is often true because special interest groups have gained an audience and power. Comprehensive quality services to students are not developed by squeaky wheels, but instead are the result of well planned efforts reflecting the beliefs and commitments of several constituencies. Equitable access to resources also implies that resources are based on the needs of students and not solely on the needs of teachers or administrators.

By using these five key strategies, a healthy relationship with the different education reform efforts becomes possible. Each education reform strategy can be accepted by educators of the gifted as an opportunity rather than a barrier.

A Gifted Leadership Conference in the state of Washington demonstrated one way that using this process can generate strategies for blending gifted education and school reform. Participants identified eight education reform efforts affecting services to highly capable students. The resulting product, created by the 41 participants, was entitled: "The Reform Movement: Where Do Gifted Students Fit?" (Fascilla, Hanninen, & Spritzer,, 1991). The following reform strategies, excerpted from the original publication, illustrate how bridges in thinking can be built between education reform and gifted education.

Grouping: Strategies for Success with Gifted Students

Six guidelines to use when considering grouping options (Rogers, 1991):

1. Students who are academically or intellectually gifted and talented should spend the majority of their school day with others of similar abilities and interests.
2. Cluster grouping of students within an otherwise heterogeneously grouped classroom can be considered when schools cannot support a full-time gifted program.
3. In the absence of full-time gifted program enrollment, students might be offered specific group instruction across grade levels, according to their individual knowledge acquisition in school subjects.
4. Gifted students should be given experiences involving a variety of appropriate acceleration-based options, which may be offered to gifted students as a group or on an individual basis.
5. Students should be given experiences which involve various forms of enrichment that extend the regular school curriculum, leading to the more complete development of concepts, principles, and generalizations.
6. Mixed-ability cooperative learning groups should be used sparingly, perhaps only for social skills development programs.

Outcomes-Based Education: Strategies for Success with Gifted Learners

1. Maintain programs for gifted until acceptable options are available, that is, acceleration, self-contained classes, or advanced classes.
2. Educate all staff so that they are able to identify and provide appropriate curriculum for gifted students.
3. Pretest before initial instruction, and provide gifted students credit for prior learning.
4. Provide an enriched curriculum for all students and acceleration and/or in-depth study for gifted students.
5. Ensure opportunities for flexibility in scheduling so that students can be appropriately grouped and regrouped.
6. Provide gifted students the opportunity to work with their academic or intellectual peers/mentors.
7. Match new learning experiences that capitalize on the students' strengths and interests to the expected student outcomes, and provide appropriate assessment options.
8. Match the curriculum to the student's learning rate.
9. Eliminate the ceiling on learning (i.e., if a student is ready to learn algebra in 5th grade, the system must not only permit it, it should support it).
10. Extend the depth and breadth of the lessons.

Within each education reform strategy, ideas were presented that respect the integrity of the research and assure appropriate learning opportunities for students who are gifted.

All students in our schools, including those who are gifted, deserve the best education we are capable of providing. On the one hand, education reform efforts reflect those approaches deemed necessary to accomplish that goal. On the other hand, gifted education has frequently been perceived as being the best in education provided only for "the best." If the aim of education reform is that all students should experience "gifted teaching," then the expertise and support of educators of the gifted should be a part of those efforts. Concurrently, all educators need to acknowledge that "gifted teaching" does not necessarily mean effectively "teaching the gifted." Knowing the difference depends upon understanding the nature of a student's gifts and talents. It also means placing greater value on each student's strengths.

The keys to successful education reform for students who are gifted results in educators and parents who can continually:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of the education reform strategies used in their districts.
2. Review the quality and clarify the relationship of educational services for students who are gifted.
3. Understand the complexity of the "big picture" as different education reform strategies are institutionalized in schools and beliefs about services for students who are gifted are incorporated.

Education reform is an opportunity for professionals in gifted education to recognize what works, what does not work, where "hitchhiking" on the ideas of others is wise, and to understand the changes that are needed to assure excellence in learning and character development. An inevitable outcome will be better schools for all students.

Resources

Fascilla, P., Hanninen, G. E., & Spritzer, D. (Eds.). (1991). *The reform movement: Where do gifted students fit?* Olympia, WA: Gifted Leadership Conference, c/o OSPI.

Ministry of Education (1991). *Supporting learning: Understanding and assessing the progress of children in the primary program.* Province of British Columbia.

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